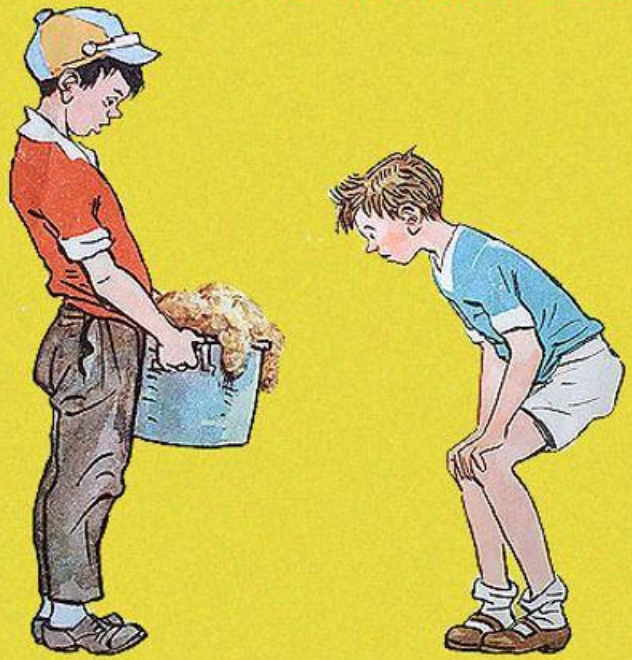
N.Nosov

MISHKA'S PORRIDGE



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Illustrated by I. Semenov

Last summer when I was living in the country with my mother, Mishka came to stay with us. I was very pleased to see him because I had been quite lonely without him. Mum was pleased to see him too.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "You two boys can keep each other company. I have to go to town early tomorrow, and I don't know when I'll be back. Do you think you can manage here by yourselves for two days?"

"Of course, we can," I said. "We aren't babies."

"You'll have to make your own breakfast. Do you know how to cook porridge?"

"I do," said Mishka. "It's easy as anything."

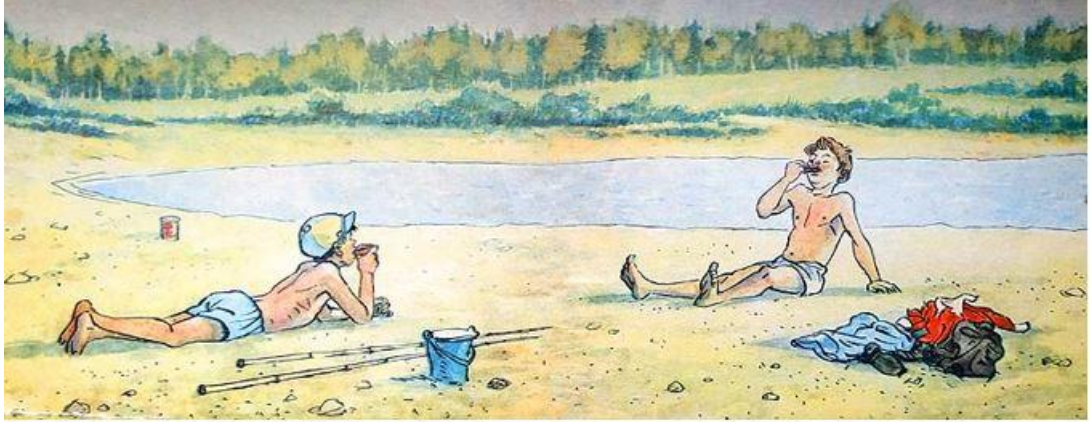
"Mishka," I said, "are you quite sure you know? When did you ever cook porridge?"

Don't worry. I've seen Mum cook it. You leave it to me. I won't let you starve. I'll make you the best porridge you've ever tasted."

In the morning Mum left us a supply of bread and some jam for our tea and showed us where the oatmeal was. She told us how to cook it too, but I didn't bother to listen. Why should I bother if Mishka knows all about it, I thought.

Then Mum went away and Mishka and I decided to go down to the river to fish. We got out our fishing-tackle and dug up some worms.

"Just a minute," I said. "Who's going to cook the porridge if we go down to the river?"



"Who wants to bother with cooking?" said Mishka. "It's too much trouble. We can eat bread and jam instead. There's plenty of bread. We'll cook the porridge later on when we get hungry."

We made a lot of jam sandwiches and went off to the river. We went in swimming and lay on the sandy beach afterwards drying ourselves and eating our sandwiches. Then we fished. We sat for a long time but the fish wouldn't bite. All we got was a dozen or so gudgeons, teeny-weeny ones. We spent most of the day down at the river. Late in the afternoon we got terribly hungry and hurried home to get something to eat.

"Now then, Mishka," I said. "You're the expert. What shall we make? Something that won't take long to cook. I'm awfully hungry."

"Let's make some porridge," said Mishka. "It's the easiest."

"All right," I said.

We lit the stove. Mishka got the meal and pot.

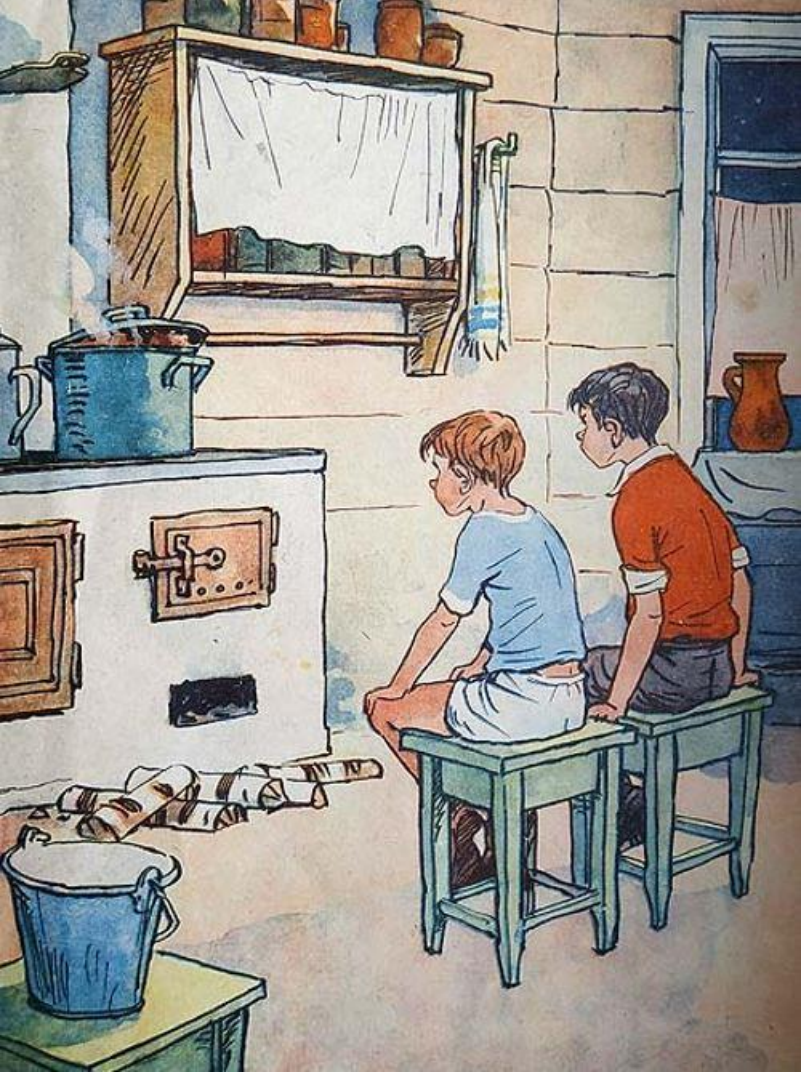
"See you make plenty while you're at it. I could eat a horse."

He nearly filled the pot up with meal and poured in water up to the brim.

"Isn't that too much water?" I said.

"No, that's the way Mother makes it. You look after the stove and leave the porridge to me."

So I kept the fire going while Mishka cooked the porridge, which means that he sat and watched the pot, because the porridge cooked by itself.



Before long it got quite dark, and we had to light the lamp. The porridge went on cooking. Suddenly I looked up and saw the pot lid rising and the porridge spilling out over the side.

"Hey, Mishka," I said. "What's the matter with the porridge?"

"Why, what's wrong with it?"

"It's climbing right out of the pot!"

Mishka grabbed a spoon and began pushing the porridge back into the pot. He pushed and pushed, but it kept swelling up and spilling over the side.

"I don't know what's happened to it. Perhaps it's ready?"

I took a spoon and tasted a little, but the meal was still hard and dry.

"Where's all the water gone?"

"I don't know," said Mishka. "I put an awful lot in. Perhaps there's a hole in the pot?"

We looked all over the pot but there wasn't any sign of a hole.

"Must have evaporated," he said. "We'll have to add some more."

He took some of the porridge out of the pot and put it on a plate; he had to take out quite a bit to make room for the water. Then we put the pot back on the stove and let it cook some more. It cooked and cooked and after a while it began spilling over the side again.

"Hey, what's this!" cried Mishka. "Why won't it stay in the pot?"

He snatched up his spoon and scooped out some more porridge and added another cup of water.

"Look at that," he said. "You thought there was too much water."

The porridge went on cooking.

And would you believe it, in a little while it lifted the lid and came crawling out again!

I said: "You must have put too much meal in. That's what it is. It swells when it cooks and there's not enough room in the pot for it."

"Yes, that must be it," said Mishka. "It's all your fault. You told me to put a lot in because you were hungry, remember?"

"How do I know how much to put in? You're the one who's supposed to know how to cook."

"So I do. I'd have it cooked by now if you hadn't interfered."

"All right, cook away, I shan't say another word."

I went off in a huff and Mishka went on cooking the porridge, that is, he kept scooping out the extra porridge and adding water. Soon the whole table was covered with plates of half-cooked porridge. And he added water each time.

Finally I lost patience.

"You're not doing it right. This way the porridge won't be ready till morning."

"Well, that's how they do it in big restaurants. Didn't you know that? They always cook dinner the night before so it should be ready by morning."

"That's all right for restaurants. They don't need to hurry because they have heaps of other food."

"We don't need to hurry either."

"Don't we?! I'm starving. And besides it's time to go to bed. See how late it is."

"You'll have plenty of time to sleep," he said, throwing another glass of water into the pot. Suddenly it dawned on me what was wrong.

"Of course it won't cook if you keep adding cold water," I said.

"You think you can cook porridge without water?"

"No, I think you've still got too much meal in that pot."

I took the pot, spilled out half the meal and told him to fill it with water.

He took the mug and went to the pail.

"Dash it," he said. "The water's all gone."

"What shall we do now? It's pitch dark, we'll never be able to find the well."

"Rats, I'll bring some in a jiffy."

He took matches, tied a rope round the handle of the pail and went off to the well. In a few minutes he was back.

"Where's the water?" I asked him.

"Water? Out there in the well."

"Don't be silly. What've you done with the pail?"

"The pail? That's in the well too."

"In the well?"

"That's right."

"You mean you dropped it?"

"That's right."

"Oh, you silly ass! We'll starve to death this way. How are we going to get water now?"

"We can use the kettle."

I took the kettle. "Give me the rope."

"I haven't got it."

"Where is it?"

"Down there."

"Down where?"

"In the well."

"So you dropped the pail along with the rope?"

"That's right."

We started hunting for another piece of rope, but we couldn't find any.

"Never mind. I'll go and ask the neighbours," said Mishka.

"You can't," I said. "Look at the time. Everyone's gone to bed long ago."

As luck would have it, both of us felt awfully thirsty. We were simply dying for a drink.

Mishka said: "It's always like that. When there's no water you always feel thirsty. That's why people always get thirsty in the desert — because there's no water there!"

"Never mind about deserts," I said. "You go and find some rope."

"Where shall I find it? I've looked everywhere. Let's use the fishing-line."

"Is it strong enough?"

"I think so."

"What if it isn't?"

"If it isn't, it'll break."

We unwound the fishing-line, tied it to the kettle and went out to the well. I lowered the kettle into the well and filled it with water. The line was as taut as a violin string.

"It’s going to snap," I said. "You’ll see."

"Perhaps it’ll hold if we lift it very, very carefully," said Mishka.

I raised it as carefully as I could. I had just got it above the water when there was a splash, and the kettle was gone.

"Did it break?" asked Mishka.

"Of course it did. How are we going to get water now?"

"Let’s try the samovar," said Mishka.

"No. We might as well throw the samovar straight into the well. Less trouble. Besides, we haven’t any more rope."

"All right then, use the pot."

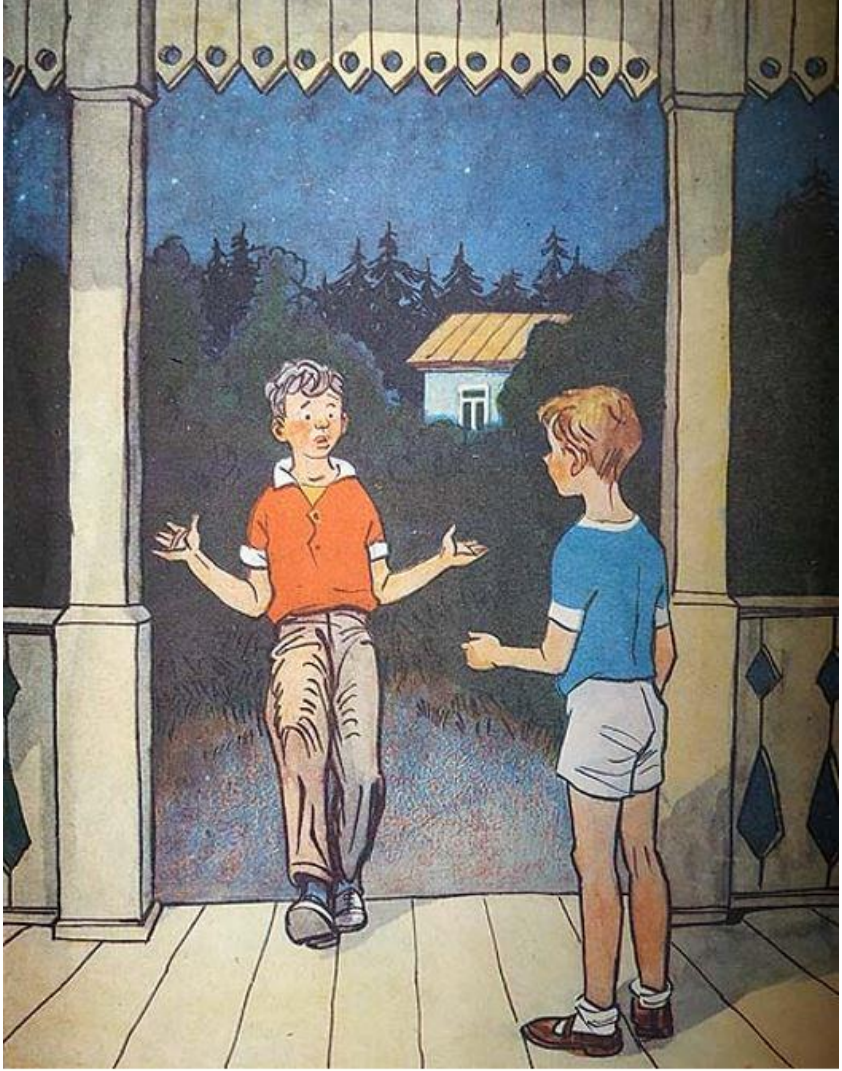
"We haven’t so many pots to throw away," I said.

"Well, then, try a tumbler."

"Do you want to spend the rest of the night scooping up water by the tumblerful?“

"But what are we going to do? We’ve got to finish cooking the porridge. Besides, I’m terribly thirsty."

"Let’s try the tin mug," I said. "It’s a little bigger than a tumbler anyway."



We went back to the house, tied the fishing-line to the mug so that it wouldn't overturn and went back to the well. After we had drunk our fill of water Mishka said:

"It's always like that — when you're thirsty you think you could drink up the sea, but when you begin drinking you find one mugful is plenty. That's because people are naturally greedy."

"Stop jabbering and bring the pot out here. We can fill it with water straight from the well. It will save us running back and forth a dozen times."

Mishka brought the pot and stood it right at the edge of the well. I very nearly knocked it off with my elbow.

"Silly ass," I said. "What's the idea of putting it right under my elbow? Hold on to it and keep as far from the well as you can, or you'll send it flying into the water."

Mishka took the pot and moved away from the well. I filled it up and we went back to the house. By this time our porridge was quite cold and the fire had gone out. We got it going again and put the pot back on the stove to cook. After a long time it started to boil, thickened gradually and made plopping noises.

"Hear that?" said Mishka. "We're going to have some wonderful porridge soon."

I took a little on a spoon and tasted it. It was awful! It had a nasty bitter burnt taste, and we had forgotten to salt it. Mishka tasted it too and spat it out at once.

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"No," he said. "I'd rather die of hunger than eat such stuff."

"You would certainly die if you did eat it," I said "But what shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"Donkeys!" cried Mishka. "We've forgotten the fish."

"We're not going to start bothering with fish at this time of night. It will be morning soon."

"We won't boil them, we'll fry them. They'll be ready in a minute, you'll see."

"Oh, all right," I said. "But if it's going to take as long as the porridge, count me out."

"It'll be ready in five minutes, you'll see."

Mishka cleaned the fish and put them on the frying-pan. The pan got hot and the fish stuck to the bottom. He tried to pull them off and made quite a mess of them.

I said: "Whoever tried frying fish without oil?"

Mishka got a bottle of vegetable oil and poured some on to the pan and put it into the stove straight on the coals so it should cook faster. The oil spluttered and crackled and suddenly it caught fire. Mishka snatched up the frying-pan and I wanted to pour water on it, but there wasn't a drop of water in the house, so it burned and burned until all the oil had burned out. The room was full of smoke and all that was left of the fish were a few burned coals.

"Well," said Mishka, "what are we going to fry now?"

"No more frying. Besides spoiling good food you're liable to burn the house down. You've done enough cooking for one day!"

"But what shall we eat?"

We tried chewing raw meal, but it wasn't much fun. We tried a raw onion, but it was bitter. We tried vegetable oil and nearly made ourselves sick. Finally we found the jam pot, licked it clean and went to bed. It was very late by then.

We woke up in the morning as hungry as wolves. Mishka wanted to cook some porridge, but when I saw him get out the meal I got cold all over.

"Don't you dare," I said. "I'll go to Aunt Natasha, our landlady, and ask her to cook some porridge for us."

We went to Aunt Natasha and told her all about it and promised to weed her garden for her if she would cook some porridge for us. She took pity on us and gave us some milk and cabbage pie while she cooked our porridge. And we ate and ate as if we couldn't stop. Aunt Natasha's little boy Vovka stood watching with his eyes popping out.

At last we had had enough. Aunt Natasha gave us a hook and some rope and we went to fish the pail and the kettle out of the well. It took us a long time before we finally managed to pull them up.

But luckily nothing got lost. After that, Mishka and I and little Vovka weeded Aunt Natasha's garden.

Mishka said: "Weeding is nothing. Anybody can do it. It's easy.

Much easier than cooking porridge, anyway."